

## Robert Curvin Interview: Larry Hamm

CURVIN: Okay we're on camera Larry, so why don't we start by, you know, saying who you are and what this is about

HAMM: My name is Larry Hamm, I am the chairman of the People's Organization for Progress and I'm doing this interview voluntarily of my own free will and for educational and other good purposes.

CURVIN: Great. Okay, Larry, tell me about your history in Newark, you know, where did you start? Were you born in Newark? When did you come to the city and so on?

HAMM: I was actually born in Washington DC but literally just months after I was born I was brought to Newark, New Jersey. This is a kind of foot note and I am going to collapse it real quick but I'm actually adopted and did not find this out until I was 44 years old.

CURVIN: Wow.

HAMM: Yes. What happened was my mother who gave birth to me, Teresa Burton, was living with my father's brother and his wife because at that time, you know, out of birth, wedlock, you know, was frowned upon and some young women had to leave their homes. So as I understand it, as the story was related to me by my mother, she was taken in by my father's, when I say my father's, the father who raised me, Lawrence Hamm Sr., was taken in, so my father's, my Grandfather died, my father that raised me, his father died. They went to, I believe it was Richmond, for the funeral and on the way back from the funeral they stopped at his brother Albert's house, and I didn't know this as I said, til I was 44, my mother could not have children, she was unable to have children so Albert asked Larry, SR., my father, did he want a baby. And Larry said, 'well ask grace', ask my mother that raised me. They said 'yea' they took the baby, got on the train back to Newark, New Jersey. Yea so this was just months after I was born so I was raised practically all of my life in Newark, New Jersey. The first 4 years of my life

CURVIN: What a wonderful gift for your parents who raised you.

HAMM: Oh well.

CURVIN: We feel the same way; we have an adopted daughter.

HAMM: Really?

CURVIN: Who is the prize of our life and we just feel so blessed.

HAMM: I think it happened for the better. My mother was quite worried she told me this literally on my 44<sup>th</sup> birthday, when I went to see her in the White House nursing home, not far from here, in Orange, New Jersey. And the only reason she told me was because my natural mother, Teresa

Burton, had found her, because Teresa was not in the house when the baby was given away. This was not a legal adoption. You know, my mother might have taken the secret to the grave, because she died like about nine months after she told me. She told me on December 24<sup>th</sup>, my 44<sup>th</sup> birthday, and she passed away the following August. The only reason she told me was because Teresa had found her. And Teresa had found her through the Make a Wish Foundation, with the assistance of the make a wish foundation. And all my life no one ever intimated in any way whatsoever that I was anyone other than Grace's son. And you know, it just happened that it worked out this way, and my mother had to tell me and she told me. I think it worked out for the better.

CURVIN: When you think about what you've done and where you are, what mother would not be so proud of having Larry Hamm as a son.

HAMM: For another interview I'll talk about that because I'm an activist but there were times when my mother wished I wasn't an activist.

CURVIN: I'm sure, I'm sure. But let me ask you this, tell me about school when you were in Newark.

HAMM: Let me just say, first four years I grew up on Ridgewood Avenue. Ridgewood and Avon in the central ward, I lived right next door to the Ridgewood Bar on the corner of Ridgewood and Avon across the street from \_\_\_\_\_ Restaurant (5:12). We lived 5 Ridgewood Avenue. Lived there until 1957, I was born in 53. My father that raised me, Larry Hamm Sr. he died in '57 at the age of 53 years old and then after that, my mother went to live with her parents, my mother that raised me, went to live with her parents, Claude and Stella Cobb at 527 South 12<sup>th</sup> Street, where I lived for 23 years. So my early schooling, I started kindergarten I believe in '57, in the fall of '57 or '58 I really can't remember, at South 17<sup>th</sup> Street School in Newark, which is still there, still a functioning school, and I went to South 17th street School from the kindergarten through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It was the only elementary school I went to. And was doing okay 'til I got to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, got in a lot of trouble, got thrown out of school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and my mother had to come back and beg the principal to let me back in and let me graduate, and he did. It was very interesting because I had gotten expelled from school, or suspended because a group of us, we were upset about one of our other friends getting thrown out of school. We threw rocks at the school and broke out the school windows and so all of us got put out. And I never remember my mother crying the way she cried in front of the principal; his name was Mr. King, to beg him to let me graduate. It was interesting because had that happened today the police would've been called in, the police would've been involved and I probably would've went to jail or reformatory or something, youth facility, youth juvenile jail or whatever. But he didn't, it was all handled by the school and I was able to graduate, and after that little episode I decided to try to get my life back on track. And I had some teachers at south 17<sup>th</sup> street, I guess who saw something worth redeeming in me. One of those was Mrs. Ryerson. Ms., not Mrs. Ms. Ryerson, who was my 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. She tried to get me to take the test for Arts High in the fall of my

8<sup>th</sup> grade year and I didn't want to go to Arts High, I wanted to go to Westside with all my friends. But Ms. Ryerson knew I could read music because I had taken guitar lessons and I could play the guitar a little bit and I could read music and so she said take the test, I said no in the Fall. Then I got thrown out of school, then came back, you know she offered the test twice. She offered the test in the spring so she said take the test. So trying to be a better person I took the test and got admitted to Arts High that spring. But Ms. Ryerson did something that was really interesting for a white woman in 1967 Newark, New Jersey, one day she said to me 'come on I'm taking you downtown' I said 'why?' she said 'I'm going to take you to meet somebody' I said 'okay'. So after school she took me downtown to Bamberger's department store, and Bamberger's used to have a bookstore on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, a book department, where they sell books. And who was up there signing books? Jesse Owens, signing books, signing his biography I guess is what it was. And this white woman, I guess she thought it would have an impact on me to meet Jesse Owens. I'm sure you know and everybody else knows the history of Jesse Owens, and that was the, it wasn't the first famous black person I had met, I had actually met Louis Armstrong some years earlier when I was like in the fourth or fifth grade. There used to be an amusement park called Freedomland and Louis Armstrong performed there. At that age, I didn't really have quite an understanding but because of what Ms. Ryerson explained to me and because of talk with my family and other stuff I kind of understood that Jesse Owens was a significant and famous person. He gave me a copy of his book and autographed it and so after that I went to Arts High School. I came there in the fall of 1967. The rebellion occurred my 8<sup>th</sup> grade, ending of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year and beginning of my freshman year at arts high school. And I came out of a very nonpolitical family. There were not many discussions about politics in my family. The only discussion I did remember was my grandfather talking about Dr. King, and I guess King had come out against the war in Vietnam and my grandfather said that King should stick with civil rights. [laughs] you know, which was, kind of parroting the line that the establishment had at the time. This is a true story. That's the one true memory I have of Dr. King. The other thing that I guess is a kind of proto-political experience was like around the 6<sup>th</sup> grade there was an article in the newspaper about this man who had designed a flag for the negro people. Now this wasn't the red black and green flag. This was a flag that was red, had a diagonal blue part to it, had a gold braid with a sword in the middle, you know. I guess I was aware that I was a negro, I did not come from a family that had a lot of discussions, but there were incidents. Like, I was a kind of kid- in the old days, people send their kids down south for the summer- so they would send me down south for the summer. My mother's people were from Gainesville, Georgia and I could remember, my aunt, my mother, my grandmother's sister, which I guess would be my grandaunt, we were all on the train in Newark. You know, we got on the silver meteor which still runs, that's an east coast train and when we got to Washington DC we were told we had to move to another car by the conductor because as it was explained to me, Washington DC was on the Mason Dixon line, so when you went through Washington the segregated laws of interstate travel came into effect. So there were little things that would happen. The fact that in the early 50s there were still segregated movie theatres in Newark, New

Jersey, and even the segregated theatres aside, most Black people didn't even go downtown to shop. We either shopped in the neighborhood or we went down to Prince Street. And then it was only like in the 60s, like mid-60s, that we started going downtown. I remember my mother taking me downtown. You know but I knew that there had been segregated movie theaters in Newark, New Jersey. But segregated movie theaters notwithstanding, segregated neighborhoods. So like we went to the national theater that was on what was called Belmont Avenue at the time, which is now Irvine Turner Blvd. National theater was like down the street from the Tasty Bread factory you know, so everything was segregated. I never- in my family, I never had this feeling- now I know were poor, you know, we were poor but I didn't think that when I was coming up. I never felt that way. And I knew we were Negros, at that time that's what we called ourselves, but it was just incidental, we were. Just like they were Italians, we were Negros, and my school was pretty integrated up until the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. My class that graduated south 17<sup>th</sup> street school 1967, was integrated. We had Irish, we had pols, we had Italians, I remember that, we played softball together. I can't even- to tell you the truth, I can even remember fights that would break out because on a racial basis. There were fights, but it wasn't because they were black and he was white. It was something else happened, you took my baseball bat or you took my bicycle, you know, stuff like that. It was things that happened along the way, not a lot of political discussions. You know so, the summer of 67 believe it or not I was actually at a party across the street. I had a friend, his name was Willy-C, I don't know what his last name was but we called him Willie C. He was across the street, he was having a little house party in his house. I was over there; my mother knew I was over there. Somebody came running up the stairs 'They Are burning up Springfield avenue' and all of us came running down and we got ready to run down, we were already running to Springfield Avenue toward the danger. My mother was on the porch downstairs. We lived on the second floor, she was on the first floor telling me to get my butt

CURVIN: back in the house [laughing]

HAMM: back in the house! [laughing] 'you are not going down there' so I watched it from our second floor porch. We lived in a 3 family wood framed house like a lot of houses in Newark. And at first it was very festive, I shouldn't say festive, but you didn't have a sense of danger. Like you never saw all these people out in the street the way they were out in the street that night. They were all out in the street, and yes they were looting, they were breaking into the stores. There was a building- my house that I grew up in, 527 is gone, but the building across the street is still there. Now, it's a bus garage now but in 67 it was a wholesale food warehouse. And man [laughing] it had big metal doors on it, man people got them big metal doors open and corn flakes were everywhere. People were carrying out, I don't know, these bags of sugar, big bags of sugar, you know, but nobody was running, you know, it wasn't this sense of danger, you know people were just doing it. I wasn't doing it, and everybody wasn't doing it but people were doing it and they were doing it in large numbers. So that was like I guess mostly the first night. And we didn't see any- you know, didn't see too much- I mean you could hear the fire hydrants, but the next night that's when it started to get bad. The next night cars would come to the intersection

of- I live like 5 doors down from the intersection of 16<sup>th</sup> avenue and 12<sup>th</sup> street and there were guys standing on the corner that were throwing rocks at cars and stuff like that. You know, so that festive kind of mood was gone and then at a certain point martial law was declared and we couldn't leave the house. I remember that, it wasn't long it was like a day or two that we couldn't leave the house but then when we could leave to go shopping because we had to get food you know at certain points I could remember the military vehicles coming up 16<sup>th</sup> avenue and if my memory serves me correctly I think they had actually set up some kind of little post right in the intersection of 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> and were searching cars. I guess they were looking for contraband or whatever but I could remember all that. And then eventually you know things began- I guess martial law was lifted. As a twelve-year-old- I turned thirteen that December- I didn't know about martial law and all that stuff but I do remember those incidents but things return to normal but fairly quickly. Now I can remember days after the outbreak, going on Springfield Avenue and to this day I will never forget the smell, the smell that was on Springfield Avenue. I mean the smell, like what you would smell when a house was on fire but that smell would only be there for a day or two, but that smell on Springfield Avenue was there for a long time

CURVIN: it was a burning smell?

HAMM: Yes, yes, yes, burning and glass was everywhere. I mean I never saw- I mean this is an observance as a kind you know. I never saw so much glass in the street. Glass was everywhere and you could see where certain stores looked like they had just been abandoned because they had showroom windows that had been broken out and one of the things I remember was how quickly these new styles –what would you call them? -pull down grating- man they got up quick. [laughing] whoever had that contract made a lot of money.

CURVIN: A lot of money, right

HAMM: Because, you know, stores just closed and that was it. But now everybody had these pull down gratings for their stores, huge, and would cover the whole store. And that changed-it changed the panorama so to speak. It changed the environment, I remember that too. And that riot, the reason I take time out to explain that, that riot was really the first time that I actually had- because I guess now I was old enough to ask questions, and I had to ask my family, you know ask my mother, ask my grandfather: why were people doing this? Why did this happen? You know and those were like the first serious in depth discussions of race that I had. So I matriculate at Arts High School in the fall, and the first thing, you know, this is like- and that's the other thing, like school wasn't- as catastrophic as the rebellion was school started like normal. I mean things- the kind of routine of normalcy came back pretty quickly. So they had something called freshmen orientation. Maybe all the schools had it, I don't know maybe they just had it at arts high, I don't know. We had freshmen orientation. So arts high was an integrated school- pre integrated school at that time, whites, blacks, not too many Spanish, maybe like white and black. So in the freshman orientation they asked the student government president to come and speak and he's supposed to speak about the Halloween party, you know and the unicef

and stuff like this [laughing]. The student government president was a young white boy who kind of looked like, I don't know if you remember, a man called uncle, that series? He looked like \_\_\_\_\_ from a man called uncle [22:21] So he gets up there and he comes to the mic. He doesn't start talking about the Halloween party, or the student council, he starts talking about the war in Vietnam. Now I'm 12 years old sitting there, I didn't know anything about Vietnam. All I knew was about the riot, I knew about this riot because I lived through it [laughing] and I'm sitting there and this guy starts talking about Vietnam. And I think all the freshmen, we were all just in a trance, not because he was a good speaker but because we were like what the hell is he talking about? But whatever he was talking about it upset the principal. Now the principal was a white man, and for the life of me I can't remember his name because he wasn't there too long after that, but the principal came up on the stage and told him David, you cannot talk about this, sit down. David wouldn't sit down. David kept talking about Vietnam. I don't know why it was so important. I don't know if he had had a brother in Vietnam he would not- now this is not college, this is high school [laughing] and he's talking to the freshmen class about Vietnam. Then two get in a shoving match on the stage in front of the freshmen- the newly coming freshmen. This is our first experience at arts high and I'm looking at this and they were trading hands. You know, they weren't trading blows, but the principal physically removed him off the stage. That had a major impact on me.

CURVIN: Wow

HAMM: That had a major impact on me. Now at that moment I didn't think I necessarily wanted to be a member of the student council or student government president but that was a- what would be the word?

CURVIN: defining moment

HAMM: A defining moment in my political consciousness. The fact that this young person 1) had something to say and 2) was willing to go to great lengths to say it. To defy authority. Now here I was trying to bring myself back in line to obey authority. [laughing] I had just been thrown out of school, barely graduated, from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, now I want to try to turn my life around but I see this young white guy defying the authority. There's no authority-in a kid's life- there's no authority that's greater than the principal. So anyway, to speed this up, I know I'm taking too much time

CURVIN: No this is good

HAMM: Okay

CURVIN: I'm going to have to change the battery. Okay? Let's stop right there a minute.

HAMM: I know I'm going off...

CURVIN: This is great.

HAMM: --on memory lane

CURVIN: This is fabulous.

HAMM: That's a true story.

CURVIN: Oh I'm sure it is.

CURVIN: Okay, we're on.

HAMM: Okay

CURVIN: Let's pick up at Art's- finishing up at Art's High School

HAMM: To make a long story short, eventually I did become a member of the student government. In my junior year I became vice president of student government at Arts High. And in my senior year I became what you would call president. We called it Mayor and deputy Mayor of the student government. So in 1970 there was a teacher's strike. This was the first-

CURVIN: The short one

HAMM: The short one. The first teacher's strike, and it's very interesting because during that teacher's strike. They brought the student government presidents together in a meeting and there was something called- at that time- the Newark federation of high school student councils. I guess this was like the city wide federation of student governments. And we did discuss the teacher's strike. And you know what might happen etcetera. I guess this was a way of the board trying to give the students a sense of what was going on, but not a whole lot happened in '70. It was 1971 that things really

CURVIN: fell apart.

HAMM: Fell apart and became another defining moment in my life. In 1971 that was the first time I saw Amiri Baraka. Because- now don't ask me why or how, I know this- the principal that I started high school with at Arts High, by the time I became a senior he wasn't there. And the principal of Arts High was a Black woman at that time named Teresa David, who lived in the south ward of Newark, who lived in Newark, lived on Gerard Place as a matter of fact and I only found this out later but somehow Amiri Baraka was invited to speak to us. I was told to come down to room, I think it was like B-12 or B-13, it was a room on the first floor. It was actually where my Latin class was, because I took Latin in high school and you know, they said 'LeRoy Jones is going to be there speaking, LeRoy Jones and I'm like 'who is LeRoy Jones?' I didn't know who he was. You know, now this was interesting because I still lived on 12<sup>th</sup> street, I would take the number 1 bus to school every morning. I didn't ride the yellow bus, go on the regular bus to school, and I had to pass this building where these people were who were like really into African stuff. You know, they had a building on High Street, it's where the St. Benedict's gymnasium is now. And it was called- it was 502 High Street, that was the street

number and people called it 502 but I didn't know that. I just know that one day I'm walking by and here are these people dressed in clothes standing outside they had a speaker outside of the front playing jazz music. And I would pass them and they would say 'Habari Gani!' You know and I would just look, I didn't know what to say back. So me and my friends we called them the Habari Gani People because that's what they said to us. We didn't know they were speaking Swahili. You know, and one year, I'm trying to remember if it was my junior year or senior year, they actually came to our school for, I guess it was like Negro History Month or Black History Month and they sent a troop there that did boot dancing and did African dancing- oh my god- the teachers at Arts High, some of them fainted! [laughing] seeing these young black guys half naked doing this, this was not the western cultural experience that they were giving us at Arts High School. But anyway they said LeRoy Jones was coming, I'm expecting-the way people were talking- I'm expecting to see this giant, you know, and I come in the classroom and there's this little guy speaking, and had on African clothing, he even had an African coat on-the coat was like African, you know, looking. But he had two giants next to him, he wasn't giant, but he had two giants next to him, on each side of him. And he's talking about black power, you know, and all this stuff. I think I was more impacted by the visual than I was—because I still wasn't at a level where I was--

CURVIN: And this was post-election 1970 then?

HAMM: Yes. The Gibson election had happened and some of my friends actually worked in the Gibson campaign, but I didn't work in the Gibson campaign. Now, I knew we had a black mayor because that was on the news and that was important. I knew about the assassination of Dr. King although I didn't know that he had been in Newark just prior to his assassination because King was assassinated Spring of my freshman year. I came into Arts High in the Fall of 67 and Spring of 68 he was assassinated and I knew that was significant. Now we were getting more stuff about Vietnam and I was paying more attention to the news and stuff. But anyway, Baraka is speaking to us, it was great because it was just different, anything to break the routine of the regular school day, so we were just excited. A lot of us sat there in awe trying to take a lot of this in, and I have to say that some of my classmates were definitely more conscious, politically conscious than I was even though I was a student leader. They understood the Black thing better than I did. Even though I didn't grow up in an integrated—well at least by that time it—I grew up in the Central Ward of Newark but political consciousness I uneven and it doesn't develop the same way in everybody at the same pace at the same time and so some of them had participated in the Gibson election. In fact, the black panther party headquarters was right around the corner from arts high school. Yes, there's a little street behind it and their headquarters was there. I had a friend named henry, he was a high school member of the black panther party, and he used to come to school dressed, you know the Palestinian head guard, I forgot what it's called but he would come to school with that on. I guess that was scaring the hell out of the teachers. You know but he wasn't violent, nobody ever talked about doing any violence or anything. It was just like, what you identified with. And of course coming up in Newark I had to be familiar with the nation of Islam.



I was actually more familiar with the nation of Islam than I was with Baraka and his people. Because the nation of Islam people would be all everywhere selling the newspaper and out of curiosity sometime I would just buy their paper just to see what they were talking about. You know, the black panther party, Henry would be selling the black panther party newspaper at the high school.

So anyway, the teacher's strike happens in 71, so at first for us it's like fun because nothing is normal anymore. Our regular teachers are out, we got a lot of substitute teachers, you know the mechanism wasn't there the school would just press down on us. Everting was kind of like fluid. So this was fun at first, but then it stopped being fun when we found out that if we missed 35 consecutive days of school, we might not graduate. That's what was coming out in the media, that there was a possibility that all of us—now we had all applied to college, we're seniors in high school, we had applied to college, some of us had already been admitted to college. At that time, I had applied to three schools, Princeton Harvard and Yale, I was accepted at all 3 and chose Princeton. I was a pretty good student. I graduated 7<sup>th</sup> in my class academically, I was captain of the track team, the cross country team, I was the first person in the city of Newark to break 10 minutes in the two mile run. As a matter of fact, they're going to induct me into the Newark athletic hall of fame in October. Everything that you could win in track I won it, but only in my senior year because I wasn't a naturally gifted athlete. I was the guy that always came in last and that was for two years. Actually I broke 10 minutes in my junior year the first time in a dual meet between Arts High and East Side High school down there at riverbank park which is still there in Newark. I guess at the height, I was like the state group one school champion of record holding, 9 minutes and 36 seconds. So I had a good academic record, good athletic record, it was the 60s—well it was 1971 by now so the civil rights movement, affirmative action, these ivy league schools were doing some outreach to inner city communities and so I was able to go. I never visited Princeton. I had actually visited Harvard. Harvard was my first choice but Harvard didn't come through with the money, because in the end it was about the money. Harvard and Yale didn't come through with the money like Princeton did, so I'm ready to go to college, this strike is going to hold me back. So to make a long story short, we organize a march. We are going to—this is what the students are thinking—we are going to bring the strike to an end. We marched out of Arts High. Ms. David got wind that we was going to do this and she told me she said “if you walk out you're going to be suspended and you're not going to graduate. She told me that. Ms. David. So we planned the walk out for that day, we were going to come out at third period. That class was over at 10:30 or 10:40 or something like that. So I come outside at 10:40 and I'm standing out there by myself for a long time, I was like oh no! I hadn't told my mother about this or anything and I'm like oh man this is going to be 8<sup>th</sup> grade all over again. But all of a sudden at 10:45, those doors came open, and I think we must've taken over 90% of the students. They were telling me that there were hardly any students left in the school and we marched down on the gateway hotel and at first we went into Penn Station, we went in there in the waiting area and we sent some people over to open the side doors of the gateway because we didn't come through the lobby, we came through the side doors and we got up to like, my memory may fail

me now but it was like the fifth or sixth floors and two hundred of us sat in on the fifth and sixth floors of the gateway hotel. This was in the spring of 1971, maybe March.

CURVIN: That's where the negotiations—

HAMM: That's where the negotiations were taking place and man I was scared to death because I'm leading this. And I'll tell you, I never told you, I was scared to death like what have I done. But you know once you get on the roller coaster you got to ride it until the end. And it was very emotional some reporters came, at one point I was so intense I think tears were coming out of my eyes or something because I didn't want to get anybody—I had been thrown out of school once, I didn't want to get other people thrown out too. Man these sisters were going to jack these reporters up, you know the women, the high school girls that were with us. But anyway, finally mayor Gibson came, he came directly to talk to us and I think outside they must've had all of the fire trucks and all of the police cars in Newark was out there. And Gibson said well, if you guys leave, I promise you I will do everything I can to end this strike, I promise you. Because he didn't want us to get arrested, because he was talking to me because I was essentially the one who led the strike, I was the president of student government. So I believed him you know, and it also gave me a way to bring this thing to a close. You know you can't do much more than to get the Mayor to come and talk to you. {BLANK SCREEN}

...we were real militant back then and you know, the truth of the matter is I think some of the people I was leading was more militant than I was you know. Everybody was satisfied so we went back and you know the strike ended not to long after that, maybe a week after that because we kind of came in on the tail end, we weren't there on the front end we kind of came in on the tail end of it and the strike ended and in June of 71, I don't know it must've been before I actually graduated, a guy named Pete Curtin came to my house on 12<sup>th</sup> street, he was the Mayor's aide. First of all, it was just something for a white man to just show up on 12<sup>th</sup> street, that's number one and number two, considering what had gone down a few years earlier, he came and he talked to me, he said the mayor he wants to know if you'll be on the board of education and I'm like board of education? I'm trying to get to college, I'm like well talk to my mother! So my mother is there, and my mother is a very humble woman, my mother Grace, she worked around the corner at the [Hoffmanizing SP] cleaners on 16<sup>th</sup> Ave. She worked there for the whole—from the time we got on 12<sup>th</sup> street she was a seamstress in the cleaners, she fixed people's clothes. And my mother turned around and told them well you talk to Larry so I don't know. It sounded like a good thing, and by that time after the teachers strike and after having organized the march and the sit in, I did have more of a sense of having a leadership role and a leadership responsibility and I would say that the whole experience of organizing and carrying out the sit in accelerated my political consciousness because I was really like a regular high school student you know and plus I was having a pretty good run at arts high, I was about track, I was about doing well and getting into college, I was about girls, you know--

CURVIN: you were living.

HAMM: Yea. I was really. You know the political thing was not at the top of my agenda but by the time the strike was over, it had moved up, it definitely moved up and this whole thing that—see what had happened during the strike, we had presented a whole list of demands to the board and to the union, of things we wanted as students and the thing that compelled me to actually say yes to the board was the opportunity to actually implement some of the things that we demanded. Because even then there was a sense that the people wanted real change, even the students. Because people would say well what good did the sit in do? Even though nobody got thrown out of school, because once the mayor got involved that was it. Ms. David didn't throw—as far as she was concerned we were heroes now [laughs]. She was going to throw us out of school but we come back heroes because why? We had carried it out, there was no violence, nobody got arrested. Nobody said stupid things to the newspaper. It really came off really well and then Jesse Jacobs was the president of the board so his attitude was more open, he said well I'm gonna—you students set up a negotiating team and we are gonna negotiate with you the same way we negotiated with the teachers. So for several weeks after the strike was over a group of us were going down, sitting with, what was his name, Don Saunders? The same guy who was the negotiator for the board. He was in a room with us, with Jesse Jacobs and some of the other board members, going through these demands one by one. What we can do, how much we can do on this one, how much we can do on that one. I would actually say, some people think it's farfetched but new addition that's on arts high school today, I believe was a direct result of the action that the students took in 1971 because that school was very under developed, we had no gymnasium. We had a big room that they called the gymnasium, we had no playground. There was a little space in the back. The way I became a good runner, I would come out on my lunchbreak and run around the block, there was no track, there was none of that, we didn't have any of that. And because I had been the head of the student government, I was meeting other student government presidents one of the big things that happened was I was able to go meet with Tim Lee who I still know, is a friend today, he's actually a member of POP today, he was the president of student government, black, at Columbia High School. Man I came from Arts High, I went up to Columbia and I saw what those students had. They had TV production facilities, they had a swimming pool. They had a track, it was like a small college campus and I'm like, yea we are deprived. When I got in a spaceship and went from my world to this world, now I understood what people were talking about. You can kind of enclose people in an environment, you enclose them in that environment long enough, they think that environment is the world.

CURVIN: Isn't that the most powerful, damaging experience of the ghetto?

HAMM: Yes. Yes! That this is the world. This is the way it always was; the way it always will be. Yes. So anyway, I accept the offer to be on the board. I am sworn in on July 1<sup>st</sup> 1971 and that's the end of the educational experience and the beginning of the political experience.

CURVIN: Right, wow it's quite an experience. Now I have to tell you that Ken Gibson said to me when I interviewed him once that appointing you to the Board of Education was the worst mistake he ever made—

HAMM: Yes, yes.

CURVIN: -- In his life.

HAMM: Yes. He said that publically, that's a matter of record.

CURVIN: Wow.

HAMM: He didn't just say that to you. You could find newspaper articles where he said that. Yes.

CURVIN: So why does he feel that way?

HAMM: Now it's interesting... well let me just deal with the way you asked me. I think he felt that way because I probably turned out to be more militant, more aggressive than he thought I was gonna be. First of all, how much could one do, because nobody said, don't go to school or don't go to Princeton. Now I'm on the board of education, you know what an uproar the board was in at that time. There were board meetings every day. If it wasn't a meeting of the full board it was a meeting of a committee and as a board member you had to be on one of these committees, construction, buildings, grounds and supplies so on and so forth so there were committee meetings. There were board meetings, there were meetings with the community. And a lot of people don't know there were still disturbances that were breaking out even though the riot had been four years before. There were still disturbances going on in high schools and so on and so forth. I did go to Princeton, but I was like—they would send a car down there to get me, I was like leaving Princeton every day to come back to Newark every other day to try to do this board thing. And by then, I had a more full blown sense of responsibility, a more full blown sense. You know, I said I'm going to see this thing—because at a certain point I had to make a choice. I either had to choose school or choose the board. Even I knew, as Idealistic as a I was that I wasn't going to be able to do both of these, so I chose the board.

CURVIN: You left school?

HAMM: I left Princeton and oh my god, just as my appointment had been front page, time magazine, Newsweek magazine, my leaving Princeton was front page Time magazine. Because I was built up to be this example young black student, young black man, doing the right thing, all of that and now, here I have the opportunity of a lifetime, Princeton University, and I leave Princeton. And boy that broke my mother's heart. My poor mother who had in four years literally, from 67 to 71, seen me come from someone who was—because Mr. King, the day that my mother came in to beg me back into school, Mr. King told my mother—I was sitting right there—he said Ms. Hamm your son is a common hoodlum. That's what he said to my mother.

Yes. So here I am, this total transformation. Had taken place, I was not who I was four years earlier, and now I'm getting ready to throw away the opportunity of a lifetime. Nobody could understand that decision. And the only people that seemed to understand the decision were the activist in the community. Who thought, as opposed to everybody else, that this was a good thing, that he was showing his commitment to the community. But that was a minority opinion.

CURVIN: So when did you go back to Princeton?

HAMM: I went back three years later. I did exactly what I said I was going to do. I said I was going to serve out my term on the board and then I'm going to return. Because I had some understanding people at Princeton like Frank Moore, and others who were there who were not totally oblivious, because a lot of people there were oblivious to what was happening in the urban areas. They had not a clue, they knew what they read but there was an ocean spread between what their understanding was and what the reality was but I met other people at Princeton like [Yan Keru SP] who had been advisor to Nkrumah, to Castro, who was a revolutionary, you know. In fact, I met him in the summer program before I actually began in the fall and he was there and other people were there and so they helped me make that move. They said withdraw now, don't flunk out, if you withdraw, you will be able to return. And that's what I did, I withdrew, in the fall, and that was front page down there. It was tremendous pressure, I never felt so much pressure as when I left Princeton. That's the first thing that got Gibson and folks around pretty upset. Because now this was not in line with the good story, you know.

CURVIN: Now you were the bad boy.

HAMM: Now I'm a bad boy. And even in my own house, my poor family. Not to mention that people were working on them. So I came back, I did the three years on the board and I continued to fight for the student demands. I continued to organize the students. It's unfortunate that we didn't have the technology available to us at the time that it is available to people in, because people wouldn't believe how organized the high school students were back during that period. The huge marches, how we used to pull out three schools, five schools at a time to march. How students would come to the board meetings of all places in the hundreds, like the night we presented the student demands to the board. The one hundred—it was like a little booklet. The one hundred and one student demands, I think you can find those somewhere. They had to move the board meeting from 31 Greene street to the city council chambers and 101 students had signed up, each student speaking to a different demand.

CURVIN: Wow.

HAMM: And that's how the black liberation flag slipped in there because I guess the students were trying to bring the red black and green flag to school and teachers were saying they couldn't bring it. And so it wasn't a thing of replacing the American flag, it was just being able to bring this flag in. And one of the students demanded we want some action on this right now. So right there on the spot—

CURVIN: I read the transcript

HAMM: Yes, right there on the spot

CURVIN: I was shocked. It happened from the audience.

HAMM: from the audience. And the board voted for it.

CURVIN: but you supported it.

HAMM: of course I supported it because it was my constituency. But I didn't do it through dictate—it was something that came out of the audience that night, properly moved, seconded by the—the only one I think that objected was [Sevase SP]. But the next day all the other demands that have been presented that night were ignored, and the only thing that was focused on was the black liberation flag. So that, and me changing my name to an African name, from Larry Hamm to Udimu Chunga [SP]. I'm sure those things really drove Gibson crazy and made him say I was the worst appointment he ever made.

Now the name change, let me just say a word on that because it didn't just happen out of the clear blue sky. During the period that I was on the board, that was the period towards the National Black Political Convention was happening. A lot of people don't know but there was a whole election process that led up to the National Black Political Convention. There were conventions held, local county and state conventions, people were elected up and up and up until they were finally elected to go to Gary. So the whole delegation that came out of jersey to Gary were people who had been elected at these conventions, these black political conventions and I was elected. I was one of the people that was elected. I was probably the youngest or one of the youngest persons that was elected to go to the Gary convention. Gary is what made me ask for an African name.

CURVIN: I see.

HAMM: because I had never seen black people functioning the way black people functioned in Gary. The first thing was, of course, where I had been vilified around the black flag. Nobody said 'the Newark Board of Education said this' they said 'Larry Hamm did this' but I took it. You know, I took it. I wasn't scared. I took it but—Baraka said he was in Africa when he heard about it, Tanzania. You know, my mother would be sitting home, and the vice president of public affairs for ABC television would come on television and editorialize—Imagine if you're a parent and you're sitting home and the Vice President of a TV station comes on and starts condemning your son [laughs] for doing what he did. And none of the knew the story, none of the ever talked about the other demands, the other things that we were trying to do that we wanted to do to improve the schools. But anyway, I came out of the central ward of Newark, destruction all around, I can remember even almost as a child, a baby, you know when I was like 4 years old, living next to the Ridgewood bar. I can remember people being laid out on my stoop. Couldn't

get from the bar next door to the house. People being stabbed and cut and shot. People talk like this crime that we are having is something new in the community. Drug addiction. You know, growing up in that real negative environment and then I get to Gary, where thousands of black people are coming together and functioning like a government and trying to plan the future of black people—I was transformed by that. I was transformed by that first, and then the other thing was when I got off the plane I think Gary was held at the west side high school, it was either west side or central, it was one of those same names like Newark schools but I think it was west side high school in Gary, there was a big boulevard that led down to the high school and Dick Hatcher, who was the mayor of Gary had red black and green flags on every lamp post leading all the way down this boulevard. I was uplifted. I was like wow, this is possible!

CURVIN: You had reached black heaven [Laughs]

HAMM: That's right! [Laughs] A black Zion in a matter of speaking right.

CURVIN: Let me put another battery in.

HAMM: Oh no we're out already?

CURVIN: This is a short one, I only have one minute left so I'm going to stop it.

HAMM: Okay

[PAUSE]

CURVIN: Okay here we go.

HAMM: where were we? Oh I was talking about Gary and the how the Gary experience—

CURVIN: So Gary was kind of a—

HAMM: an epiphany

CURVIN: -- a reaffirming

HAMM: Yes, an epiphany. I kept moving. My political consciousness, I think, as with everybody's political consciousness, it was developing as I went on and I think maybe what might differentiate me from some other people is that I had some real sharp—

CURVIN: I'm going to have to stop again, this battery is not—

HAMM: okay, that's not the right one?

CURVIN: well it doesn't have anything in it.

HAMM: ohhh